The
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A surfeit of prigs

In pre-revolutionary Connecticut, being a common scold was a felony. Despite the currently overcrowded conditions of our prisons there is much to be said for reviving this offense, for few characteristics of the eighties have been more burdensome than the noisy priggishness that has come over the land.

For some years we had a woman in our neighborhood who had the disconcerting habit of standing on her front porch heaping opprobrium on passing children. It didn't particularly bother the children, because the very young are blissfully immune to priggishness, knowing that anyone who behaves in such a manner properly belongs in an asylum.

The problem for adult America is that we increasingly seem to be taking such people seriously. We have elected a remarkable number to office, with the inevitable result that prigs are now taking over appointive positions as well -- most disastrously on the Supreme Court which now has its first prig majority in many decades.

Worse, prigs are in ascendency in places where they have previously been disqualified. For example, prigs, while long allowed in the editorial offices of newspapers, were largely banned from newsrooms. Prigs in show business were limited to such activities as the Morman Tabernacle Choir, Up With People and the Lawrence Welk Show. Now we even have priggish rock stars, engaged, among other things, in pelvic proselytizing against drugs. Prigs have even infiltrated the left.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. To some readers, the word may seem a bit arcane so a definition is in order. I like that of Webster's Third, in part because the definer clearly doesn't care for prigs, priggishness or priggism, perhaps because some prig is always trying to keep certain words out of dictionaries.

A prig, according to Webster's is, among other things, *one who offends or irritates by obvious or rigid observance of the proprieties: one self-sufficient in virtue, culture or propriety often in a pointed manner or to an obnoxious degree.*

Being priggish *is marked by overvaluing oneself or one's ideas, habits, notions, by precise or inhibited adherence to them.*

And priggism is *self-conscious propriety of conduct; stilted correctness of behavior; prim adherence to conventionality.*

I have tried to deal with the excess of prigs by following Sam Goldwyn's advice -- "Don't even ignore them" -- but the situation is getting out of hand. We have, for example, elected a prig as president.

Some might say that we have elected a second prig as president but this is not technically correct. Reagan was a quack and a charlatan which is not the same thing. The difference between Bush and Reagan is the difference between Jerry Falwell and Joe Isuzu. The quack climbs the flag pole to get your attention; the prig does so believing that is where one finds the high moral ground.

I was made aware of this subtlety by an English friend who pointed out that Margaret Thatcher was far worse than Reagan because she was always on the tube hectoring the nation.

George Bush on the front porch of the White House piously exuding his puerile proprieties and heaping opprobrium on passing citizens who don't observe them is clearly far more akin to the supercilious prime minister than was the Great Prevaricator.

Hard as it is to listen to the man, it becomes even worse when one realizes that we have to do so because the prigs are so firmly in control. And being in control means that it is now possible to make it unlawful *not* to be a prig. Here the matter becomes serious. This is no longer simply a matter of some pretentious sophomore dressed as a waiter

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This distinction is often missed because the politicians and justices go to great lengths to pretend it is not so. Occasionally the efforts fall a bit flat as in the recent dictum which unintentionally declared the Menorah the moral equivalent of a Christmas tree. But the prevailing myth remains that we make no distinctions amongst religions.

I was surprised to find, for example, how few gave any credence to the argument that a Supreme Court ruling restricting *Roe v. Wade* would, in effect, create a hierarchy of religions in violation of the establishment clause; that the court could not interfere in abortion matters without simultaneously issuing a de facto encyclical.

The reason why the court and political meddling in religion is so hard to see is that the meddlers do not make distinctions based on either the name of the denomination or on the articles of faith. The distinction is far more subtle than that. The distinction that is made is between moral ritual and moral act, rigidity and free thinking, catechism and conscience. Despite the legal camouflage of the recent abortion decision, it was at its core another step towards making priggism -- of whatever denomination -- the official state religion of America.

It would be bad enough if the prigs had merely captured the White House and the First Street Bar, but they appear to have taken over Congress as well. This is particularly distressing, because Congress has a venerable history of avoiding the temptations of piety. The recent departure of Jim Wright, however, shows that Congress has discovered the advantages of ritual sacrifice, much as the Puritans absolved themselves by designating witches to burn for their sins.

The truth of the matter is that Jim Wright was, at worst, a politician of average corrupt tendencies. In fact, the most venal reported case of congressional corruption has had not even one-tenth of one percent of the deleterious impact on the public treasury as has the HUD scandal.

Yet Wright not only was removed from the speakership, he was forced out of Congress entirely, which in effect declared the prigs' moral values far more important than the right of the people of Wright's district to be represented by whomever they want. In a recent poll, 64% of the voters in Wright's district said they would vote for him again. This included 48% of the Republicans. Yet Congress declared propriety a higher virtue than democracy.

The disingenuous uproar over the protection of the flag offers another example of how far Congress has descended into the swamp of smug self-complacency. Neither recent or ancient history offers any justification for the hysterical reaction. We didn't even have a uniform design for the flag until 1912. As late as 1857, according to Daniel Boorstin, American flags were routinely displayed with alternative graphics, some with 30 and some with 31 stars, some arranged in a circle and some in a diamond. As recently as the 1960s, David Brinkley has recalled, flag burnings at the Capitol were a undisturbed and virtually daily event. Further, the would-be flag consecrators have shown no concern about such common forms of desecration as using the flag for commercial or political advertising, and placing it on T-shirts, tote bags, or gift-wrapping. Just the other day, the *Washington Times* ran a front-page photo of a grinning former Deputy Assistant Attorney General Victoria Toensing wrapping herself in a flag. The caption said that the other two figures in the photo were watching

Drug busts. . .

When a radio call-in listener suggested the beheading of drug dealers, guest William Bennett, chief US drug policy pusher, commented, "Morally, I don't have any problem with that at all."

William Bennett isn't the first drug czar. According to a recent report from the Cato Institute, the czar of Russia took to executing tobacco users in the 17th century. In 1914 another czar banned alcohol, a prohibition that was lifted by the Bolsheviks in 1924. Nikita Khrushchev tried a different approach in 1958, raising alcohol prices 21% to reduce consumption. He later deemed the program a failure. The Soviets again cracked down on alcohol consumption in 1985. By 1987, however, legal alcohol production was down 50% and moonshing was up 40%. Some 200,000 persons were prosecuted for illegal home brewing. The Russians that same year also out-did Bennett by banning the sale of men's cologne in the city of Murmansk until 2 pm when liquor stores opened.

Other great moments in Cato's history of the "war on drugs:"

16th Century: Coffee banned in Eygpt and supplies of coffee burned. Use spreads rapidly.

C. 1650: The Ottoman sultan zealously executes smokers to no avail.

1736: The Gin Act fails to halt consumption in England.

1875-1914: 27 states and cities ban opium smoking. Opium smoking increases seven-fold

1921: Cigarettes are illegal in 14 states

1924: Congress bans heroin; heroin replaces morphine in the black market.

1959: Campaign against glue-sniffing begins. Ten years later, there has been in an increase in glue-sniffing.

1962: FDA halts legal production of LSD -- LSD use skyrockets by 1970.

1968: Crackdown on marijuana use by US troops in Vietnam; troops switch to heroin.

1971: Nixon declares drugs "America's public enemy No. 1"

1973: Nixon declares "we have turned the corner on drug addiction in America."

1975: Singapore enacts death penalty for drug trafficking. A few years later, top drug official says, 'Heroin seems to be more widely used than ever."

1977: Bar Association committee concludes that Rockefeller drug law had no effect on heroin use.

Add to the list of legalized drugs: sugar. Recent studies have found that sugar reacts on the body much like other mood-altering drugs. This may help explain the craving for sweets by recovering addicts. It may also suggest yet another program for William Bennett: seizing the bicycles of youthful candy addicts.

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implying that you have chosen the wrong wine. Now you can go to jail for impropriety.

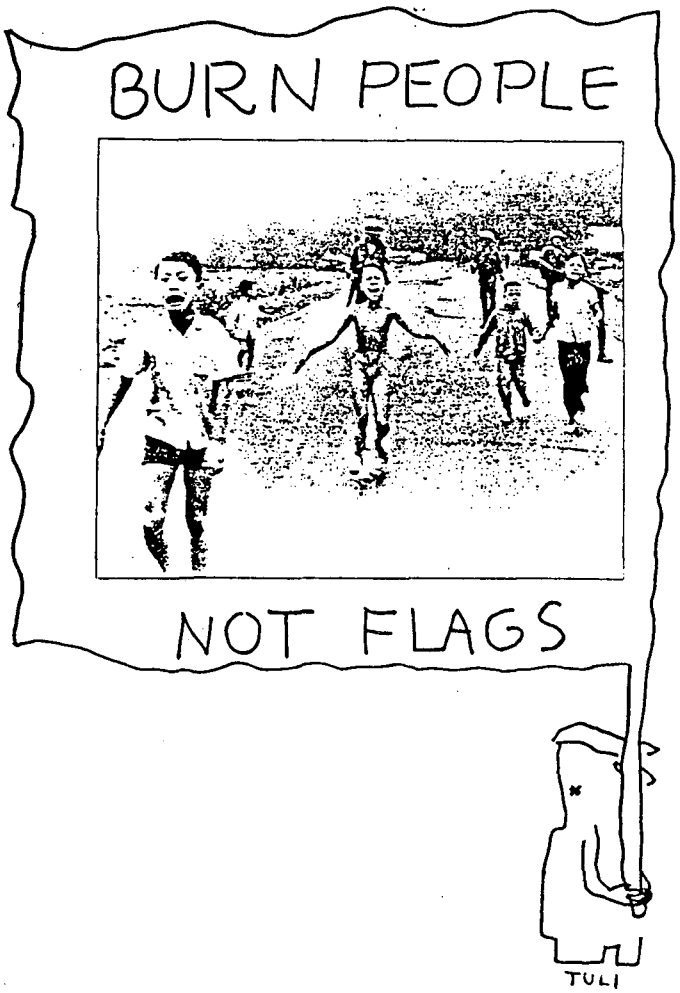
The rise of the prig is inexorably bound to recent theological developments. It is one of the burdens of this country that it must periodically be subjected to a great awakening in the form of religious mayhem perpetrated by a motley collection of evangelical hustlers, false prophets, true paranoids and prigs. Thanks to the combined effects of district attorneys, common sense and a general revival of national self-confidence, we have survived all previous awakenings and shall probably make it through this one.

There is some evidence that these upheavals are directly related to the level of stress our culture feels. For example, archaeologists have found 19th century Indian artifacts suggestive of a cult centered on a long-nosed god, which apparently swept through a sizable array of otherwise unrelated tribes during a period when Indian primacy in America was on the wane. A similar phenomenon occurred in New Guinea beginning in the 19th century and reviving following World War II. Here the culture under attack found its salvation in an odd element of that of the invaders, developing what became known as cargo cults. As one writer described it: "In the eyes of these people, the magical delivery of packages by sea and air can be brought about by imitating the rituals and habits of those representing so-called civilization. Cargo cultists are obsessively devoted to mail as a way of life."

It is not surprising that America, its global primacy on the wane, should find comfort in the long-nose god of Ronald Reagan or that Yuppie cargo cults should spring up, believing in the magical powers of Federal Express, the cellular phone and the Sharper Image catalog. Neither is it surprising that a financially and politically rewarding theological industry should develop centered on such totems of happier times as the flag and preaching an ancient piety that is far stronger in mythical memory than it ever was in reality.

It is a desperate theology and ultimately, if history behaves according to itself, a losing one. Gene McCarthy, a notable anti-prig, suggests that we have already entered a neo-colonial period. The characteristics of a colony, he points out, include foreign control of the economy, the export of raw materials and the import of finished goods, the use of the colony's military to defend other countries, and loss of control of one's borders. If McCarthy is correct, we had better make sure that the prigs' new constitutional amendment makes clear exactly which flag it is that we're not allowed to desecrate.

The fact that the world the prigs are trying to save is already gone is small comfort to the poor woman in St. Louis who does not wish to bring yet another child into the



misery she has known all her life, and her cause alone makes fighting the prigs worthwhile. Yet beyond that is the satisfaction of knowing that there is solid selfish reason for the struggle as well. Prigs, in their manic attempt to justify their own values, make life miserable for everyone else.

Woodrow Wilson, one of the few politicians who actually dealt with the prig problem, told a crowd in Pittsburgh in October 1914:

If you will think about what you ought to do for other people, your character will take care of itself. Character is a by-product, and any man who devotes himself to its cultivation in his own case will become a selfish prig.

The emphasis on salvation in isolation that is so central to current evangelicalism (not to mention certain strains of psychotherapy and contemporary self-help literature) is an ideal breeding ground for the prig. One can note, in fact, some correlation between the presumed level of God's direct notice and intervention in personal matters and the level of priggishness a religion encourages.

But whatever the cause, the relative priggishness of a religion becomes a matter of critical importance when theology spills over, as it has with a vengeance, into national politics. For when politicians and Supreme Court Justices talk and think about God they are not talking of the God of the deist, the 11th Commandment ecologist, the Unitarian, the Quaker, the liberal Catholic, the low Episcopalian, the Seventh Day Agnostic or even the ancient god of the Jew. It is patently clear from their language that they are describing The Great Prig In the Sky -- lord, master and protector of the unctuous, the self-righteous and the ostentatiously saved.

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Toensing "clown at a party." When I was in the Boy Scouts, one of the few groups that consistently has shown detailed respect for the flag, that was a no-no.

A semiotic analysis of the proposed flag amendment would bring us quickly to the matter of the relative desecration involved in conflagration vs. commercialization. Surely, if the flag is too sacred to burn, it is likewise too sacred to be used for the subliminal marketing of cosmetics. If we fail to address this question, the flag may suffer the fate of the Christian cross, which was recently featured in a Woodward & Lothrop ad hanging around the neck of a neo-medieval woman accompanied by the following reflections:

An ancient symbol that crosses the fine line of past and present. Woodies presents the power of pendants. Now more than ever, it's time to collect unique, eclectic charms. They symbolize a strong fashion message for fall.

But the prig never worries about consistency, and thus we found virtually every member of Congress engaged in an unseemly parody of patriotism that defaced national honor by making it all seem a bit silly.

This was not just the ordinary collection of congressional buffoons. The co-conspirators included none other that George Mitchell, who made a remarkably specious comparison between burning a flag and crying fire in a crowded theater. As the *Maine Times* reminded Mitchell, he was the guy who had told Oliver North: "It is the very fact that Americans can criticize their government openly and without fear of reprisal that is the essence of our freedom, and that will keep us free."

The traditional American defense against such nonsense has been a exuberantly critical press. As Frank Simonds succinctly put it, "There is but one way for a newspaper man to look at a politician, and that is down."

Unfortunately, that was many years ago. In the interim, the national press has traded its moral superiority to politicians for social equality with them. It was a bad deal.

No longer can any Washington reporter describe a Democratic convention as Walt Whitman once did, as consisting of "seven-eighths of them, the meanest kind of bawling and blowing office-holders, office-seekers, pimps, malignants, conspirators, murderers, fancy-men, custom house clerks, contractors, kept-editors, spaniels well-trained to carry and fetch, jobbers, infidels, disunionists, terrorists, mail-riflers, slave-catchers, pushers of slavery, creatures of the President, creatures of would-be Presidents, spies, bribers, compromisers, lobbyers, sponges, ruin'd sports, expell'd gamblers, policy-backers, monte-dealers, duellists, carriers of conceal'd weapons, dead men, pimpled men, scarr'd inside with vile disease, gaudy outside with gold chains made from the people's money and harlots' money twisted together; crawling, serpentine men, the lousy combinings and born freedom-sellers of the earth."

Instead we are increasingly forced to rest our knowledge of the state of the union on the sycophantic assurances of such toadying prigs as George Will, Hugh Sidey, and Carl Rowan. Worse yet are their prime time colleagues of network and local television who deliver the latest dissembling from high government officials as though it were an addendum to the letters to the Corinthians.

The aggregate effect of this is that we end up with a vision of government excessively prim on such arcane matters as extracurricular book publishing and totally indifferent to fundamentals such as massive assaults on the Constitution. Like true prigs, the message is that the proper use of finger bowls is more important than the possible contamination of the water supply. The faux pas becomes a disaster and the disaster is ignored.

There are, mercifully, exceptions, but you probably don't know their names because they are too busy writing good stories to appear on television. Besides, the big money and the big time-slots go to the prigs.

The prig, having no sense of perspective, is constantly in danger of encouraging results quite contrary to the intent declared by appearances. Thus we find Common Cause, in its priggish approach to election reform, baring no small portion of the blame for the curse of the political action committee. The priggish aspect of Naderism has been blind to the dangers of elevating litigation to the status of a moral act. The flag prigs create flag burners. And the drug prigs, of course, have simply left us with more drug problems.

Creeping propriety has even affected institutions that should, by their nature, be immune, including many of a progressive bent. This is perhaps the inevitable result of a politics which has changed from an emphasis on coalitions to a politics of the most precise special interest. Having moved vigorously in recent decades from such simplistic divisions as labor and capital, farmers and ranchers, and liberal and conservative, we now find ourselves atomized into acronyms. The organizations bearing these acronyms carry out their purported purposes, but they also increasingly define and restrict us.

By implicit consent we have limited ourselves to a maximum of two self-definitions, e.g. we may be an eco-feminist, but if you tell someone, as I occasionally do, that you are a quasi-Green, neo-populist, radical conservative, semi-libertarian, pragmatic progressive, you must expect to get a laugh, and that only at best. Most people will think you're hiding something.

The problem with over-specialized self-definitions is, firstly, that one's politics can become as prissy as the dress of the dandy and, secondly, that eventually it causes one to act on the belief that the explanation is true and complete, making one seem less a real human and more a bumper sticker.

The recent self-conscious effort to upgrade the status of blacks by calling them African-Americans demonstrates well the problems involved in excessive concern with self-definition. One need only think of how black history might have been different if a publisher had been asked to consider a book called *African-American Like Me* or if Fats Waller had written, "What did I do to be so African-American and blue?" But the determinedly pious don't sing.

I tend to stay away from political prigs even when I am in sympathy with their cause. I can smell piety a mile away and prefer the company of sinners just trying to do better to

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those who leave the strong impression that you're not really good enough to join them. Besides they might catch me eating a Big Mac.

But then, I am also the sort of person who is jarred by America's most frequently asked question: "Smoking or non-smoking?" I am tempted to respond, "I don't have a strong opinion on that but I definitely feel Frank Robinson should stick it out with the Orioles." Once, entering a hotel restaurant for breakfast, I did answer curtly, "Non-grapefruit section, please." It wasn't appreciated.

Fortunately, there is plenty of activism that doesn't ask too many questions or demand that we save ourselves before, together, we try to mitigate the damage that clearly faces all of us. Besides, the prigs never attain the perfection they pretend. They not only irritate others and deceive themselves, they miss that of the mystery of life which lies in its contradictions and inconsistencies. And the sinners know, in their hearts, that they have more fun. Furthermore, as the poet William Stafford pointed out, "If you purify the pond, the lilies die." -- *Sam Smith*

Letter to a bureaucrat. . .

The following is from a letter from the Duke of Wellington to the British Foreign Office in August 1812, written while pursing Napoleon across Spain:

Gentlemen: Whilst marching from Portugal to a position which commands the approach to Madrid and the French forces, my officers have been diligently complying with your requests.

We have enumerated our saddles, bridles, tents and tent poles, and all manner of sundry items for which His Majesty's Government holds me accountable. I have dispatched reports on the character, wit, and spleen of very officer. Each item and every farthing has been accounted for, with two regrettable exceptions for which I beg your indulgence.

Unfortunately, the sum of one shilling and nine-pence remains unaccounted for in one infantry battalion's petty cash and there has been a hideous confusion as to the number of jars of raspberry jam issued to one cavalry regiment during a sandstorm in western Spain. This reprehensible carelessness may be related to the pressure of circumstances, since we are at war with France, a fact which may come as a bit of a surprise to you gentlemen in Whitehall.

This brings me to my present purpose, which is to request elucidation of my instructions from His Majesty's Government, so that I may better understand why I am dragging an army over these barren plains. I construe that perforce it must be one of two alternative duties, as given below:

1. To train an army of uniformed British clerks in Spain for the benefit of the accountants and copyboys in London, or, perchance

2. To see to it that the forces of Napoleon are driven out of Spain.

Your most obedient servant,

WELLINGTON.

Field Notes

Publishing garbage: Patricia Poore, who built the *Old House Journal* into a 165,000 circulation magazine, is planning to publish a new environmental journal beginning in August. To be called *Garbage: The Practical Journal for the Environment,* the magazine promises to look at both the good and the problems with ecological consciousness. For example, *Garbage* notes that while bio-degradable diapers self-destruct, they also add human waste to landfills and ground water.

Green consumer guide: Joel Makower and others are compiling information for a US edition of the *Green Consumer Guide,* currently a bestseller in England. The US edition will be published early next year by Viking Penguin. The book is a consumer guide to making environmental decisions in the marketplace, including brand listings. They are looking for innovative alternative products that are environmentally sound, as well as environmental ratings of mainstream consumer products. You can reach Makower c/o Tilden Press, 1001 Conn. Ave. NW #201, DC 20036 (202-659-5855, Fax: 202-296-8736)

Fall Housing March: If your group hasn't endorsed the big housing march scheduled for October 7 in Washington, it can do so by contacting Housing Now!, 425 2nd St. NW, DC 20001 (202-347-2405).

China Watch: Human Rights Watch has a subsidiary that is keeping the pressure on the White House, Congress and business in the wake of the Chinese disaster. You can send a check to Asia Watch/China Human Rights Lifeline, 485 Fifth Avenue, NYC NY 10017.

Boycotts: We've received the latest issue of Boycott News, filled with 194 pages of information on companies against whom there are boycotts. The journal includes a buying card to help you make boycott-free choices. BN even reports that A. Whitney Brown has called for a boycott of crack to help oust General Noreiga but notes that he is "probably just joking." Four issues of Boycott News costs $10 from 6506 28th Avenue NE, Seattle, WA 98115.

Green City Program: A booklet on living well and sustainably in cities centered on San Francisco, that is the result of a year's discussion among people involved with ecological issues in northern California. $7 from Planet Drum Foundation, PO Box 31251, San Francisco, CA 94131.

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The Weather Report

The Supreme Court in its recent ruling condoning the execution of juveniles and the mentally retarded said that the decision reflected "evolving standards of maturing society."

In a recent talk at the State Historical Society in Wisconsin, media watchdog Ben Bagdikian of US-Berkeley, noted that about a dozen corporations now control more than half of daily newspaper circulation. Of four television networks and 900 commercial TV stations, "three corporations have most of the audience and revenues." There are at least 2500 book publishing companies, but "a half dozen corporations have most of the sales in the book industry." And three major studios have a hammerlock on the movie industry. Says Bagdikian, the new media owners are trying to buy control or market not just in one medium, but in all the media:

"The aim is to control the entire process from an original manuscript to its use in as many forms as possible. A magazine article owned by the company becomes a book owned by the company, then becomes a television program owned by the company, that then becomes a movie owned by the company, is shown in theaters owned by the company, and the movie's soundtrack is issued by a record label owned by the company. It does not take an angel from heaven to tell us that the company will not be enthusiastic about outside ideas and productions that is does not own. More and more we will be dealing with closed circuits that control access to most of the public."

Jay Leno reports that the Home Shopping Network and C-Span are merging "for those who want the convenience of buying a politician in the privacy of your own home."

A Gallup poll reports that Americans are far more prejudiced against having fundamentalists or unmarried couples live in their neighborhood than they are against having blacks or Jews next door. 30% wouldn't want fundamentalists as neighbors. 23% wouldn't want unmarried couples, while the figures for other groups were hispanics(16%), blacks (12%), Jews(5%), Protestants(5%) and Catholics(3%).

And just for the record, according to a CBS news survey, 7% of all Americans think Elvis Presley may still be alive. The figure for Republicans, interestingly, is 11%.

The Dublin Green Party has elected its first member to parliament and British greens won 14% of the vote for the European Parliament. Wrote *Washington Post* reporter David Broder of the EP election: "The phenomenon of the day was the surge of support for the Greens, who nearly doubled their representation."

A Delaware legislator, fed up with anti-abortion proposals requiring parental or court consent for minors' abortions, came up with a bill of his own which would require teens to seek parental permission before having sex. Republican state representative Charles Hebner said his bill "also seeks to foster inter-family communications by requiring minors to notify their parents of their intentions to engage in sexual intercourse." Minors would also have to tell parents "who their partner shall be; when and where they shall engage in this activity; and whether or not they will use any forms of contraception and/or disease control." Hebner says, "I was just trying to stress the point that you can't force people to talk to people."

Captain Will Rogers III, commanding officer of the USS Vincennes, which destroyed an Iranian airliner a year ago, has become commander of the Navy's Tactical Training Group. The group teaches tactics to senior officers.

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